

**St. Louis Post-Dispatch**  
**By: Jon Sawyer**  
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President George W. Bush said Tuesday that virtually all aspects of his Social Security reform proposals are open to negotiation, including the diversion of payroll taxes into personal retirement accounts.

"All ideas are on the table" with the sole exception of raising the payroll tax, Bush said during an Oval Office interview with the Post-Dispatch and five other newspapers.

Bush said he was encouraged by polls showing majority support for the idea of personal accounts among age groups younger than 65, and by growing recognition that changes are needed to ensure Social Security's long-term solvency.

"My strategy is pretty simple," he said. "Make the case that there's a problem -- the American people are beginning to hear that. And assure seniors that their checks won't be taken away."

He brushed aside his failure so far to attract any significant Democratic support and talk in some political quarters that his initiative is already dead.

"I think we're early in the process," Bush said. "We're just not quite there yet, and I've got more work to do . . . (O)nce people figure out there's a problem, I like to say to whoever stands in the way of a solution: 'Be careful.'"

The interview took place as Bush prepared to hit the road again, with stops this week in Florida, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado as part of his 60 cities-60 days tour to promote Social Security reform. The Democratic leaders of Congress, meanwhile, announced a news conference today to reaffirm their insistence that "any plans put forward must not weaken Social Security and must not call for massive cuts in benefits." On Capitol Hill, the Senate voted 100-0 Tuesday for a nonbinding resolution that called strengthening Social Security "a vital national priority."

Bush acknowledged that getting any legislation through Congress would require Democratic support.

"I believe this issue is going to require consensus among the parties," Bush said. "Obviously, you can never write a bill where there's 100 percent agreement. But I do believe it's important for Democrats to come to the table. And I believe they will."

Bush added that "a lot of discussion is going on" with Democrats behind the scenes already, with White House participation from Deputy Chief of Staff Karl Rove and Allan Hubbard, the administration's point person on Social Security.

The president insisted that the campaign is progressing well, notwithstanding a new Washington Post-ABC News poll showing that support for his handling of Social Security has dropped from 38 percent in December to 35 percent this week.

"If I paid attention to surveys I wouldn't do anything," Bush said. Yet he also said he took heart from the poll's finding of broad support for allowing individuals to invest some of their Social Security in stocks. But the poll also showed that as a majority heard more details of Bush's particular plan, the less they liked it.

"I'm excited about this "Democrats may think they have Bush on the run when it comes to Social Security, but there was nothing defensive about his demeanor Tuesday.

Relaxed, with legs crossed and often leaning back in a wing chair, he stressed that his battle to rewrite the nation's retirement system has only begun.

"I'm excited about this," he said. "I'm the kind of fellow who enjoys taking on big problems and I like to use

the bully pulpit of the presidency to travel the country and explain to people as clearly as I can the issue. I'm optimistic we'll get something done."

Bush said he drew inspiration from leaders such as Lincoln and Washington, whose portraits adorn the Oval Office walls.

"The job of the president is to take on problems and not pass them on -- that's what I think," he said. "I'm not here long. I want Congress to tackle big tasks. It's what the people expect."

Bush stressed his view that personal accounts represent both an opportunity to build what he terms the "ownership" society and also the best hope -- because of anticipated higher returns -- of younger workers receiving the Social Security benefits they've been promised.

What the individual accounts won't do, Bush acknowledged, is solve Social Security's long-term funding shortfall. "It's important for people to understand that personal accounts are not the permanent fix," he said.

"'Privatization' is a trick word -- basically it's to scare people," Bush said, dismissing the term critics use for the accounts. "But personal accounts, the idea of people being able to take personal savings -- their own money -- and decide to earn a better rate of return, is a concept that's very important to be discussed."

Bush praised detailed proposals that Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., and other Republicans have recently made. He urged Democrats to follow suit. But he said he wasn't yet ready to commit to any specific legislation.

"No, we want to work with members of Congress to help write a bill that can pass the Senate and House," he said. "We'll be part of the discussions. Some have suggested, 'Why don't you send a bill up?' Well, sure enough, the bill I send up will be pffft," he said, slapping his hands, "the first bill to go down."

To those Democrats who refer to Social Security as a partisan opportunity to take a stand and defeat the president, Bush had a pointed warning.

"The mind-set I think needs to happen in Washington is why don't we solve the problem on behalf of the American people? By not doing something, by standing in the way, by saying 'Let's defeat Bush,' they're basically saying let's not solve the problem for younger workers.

"And the younger workers are a heck of a lot more important than me."